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STUDENT ESSAY

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NICARAGUA - A LOST BATTLEFIELD?

BY

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NICARAGUA - A LOST BATTLEFIELD?

An Individual Essay

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ABSTRACT

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The United States' Central American Policy in reference to Nicaragua is clouded by differing intra-governmental strategic ends. The Congress favors a diplomatic solution, the Executive a military solution. The result is a contradictory, ineffective compromise strategy that handcuffs the powers of the nation and bankrupts foreign policy. The Administration offers the Contras as a means of solving this dilemma. The Contra objective is straightforward, the overthrow of the Sandinista Communists by violent means. There are several competing strategies available to achieve this objective. The most productive Contra strategies use a protracted conflict to exploit Sandinista political and economic weakness or involve the incremental seizure of areas of Nicaragua as a base to rally the support of the people. In order to achieve success, the Contras must depend on the United States for international support, supplies, and a secure external base of operations.

Nicaragua - A Lost Battlefield?

Like Christopher Columbus' first voyage to the New World, the United States' Central American Policy is embarked on a fateful journey seeking an ill-defined destination with scant regard for the uncertainties which lie along the route. Like 1492, a self-proclaimed leader of vision steers the ship of state while a reluctant crew, afraid of the unknown, bored with the unchanging scenery, offers half-hearted support while self-righteously plotting mutiny. Some would argue the seemingly rudderless policy is no worse than the frequent US military interventions of over half a century ago; nevertheless, the central questions remain to be answered. What does the United States want to accomplish in Nicaragua? What combination of actions will ensure achievement of US goals?

US INTERESTS

Security dominates US interests in Central America. Concerns which resulted in the Monroe Doctrine remain as important to Americans today as they were in the 1820's. The United States wants no European, nor any other for that matter, power to control a client state in Central America. The rise of Castro's Cuba, a clear foreign policy failure, heightened the fear of spreading communism in this hemisphere. The Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, the civil war in El Salvador, and the Panama Canal Treaty all served to increase security concerns and focus attention on a long neglected region. Safeguarding the

southern boundary and the sea lines of communications suddenly became high Administration priorities. The reinforcement of NATO, the import of African and Middle East oil, and Far East trade with the East Coast entered the Central American Policy dialogue. To these traditional issues, the struggle in Central America added the northern bound immigration tide, the possible destabilization of Mexico, and the specter of ever increasing violence on America's doorstep.

Accompanying the tangible security interest, is the deep seated US commitment to the rights of the individual, to self-determination, to responsible-representative-pluralistic government, to the pursuit of happiness and individual economic well being. The over twenty military interventions in the region at the turn of the century reflected in part the US commitment to these ideals.

US REGIONAL OBJECTIVES

The Administration's recognition of these interests is reflected in the foreign policy objectives for Central America.[1]

- To actively support democracy, reform, and human freedom against dictators and would-be dictators of both left and right.
- To promote economic recovery within a framework of sound growth and equitable distribution.
- To foster dialogue and negotiations -- a dialogue of democracy within countries, a diplomacy of negotiations among nations willing to live at peace.
- To provide a security shield against those who use violence against democracy, development, and diplomacy.

While these broad statements of interest express far reaching US goals, they do not provide a specific policy end for US policy towards Nicaragua, herein lies today's dilemma. Ample

evidence can be found to support any of the following specific strategic ends:

- To peacefully transform the government of Nicaragua into a democratic, pluralistic government.
- To contain communism in Nicaragua.
- To remove, through the use of violence, the Sandinistas (communists) from power in Nicaragua.

One of the reasons why US objectives are so wrapped in ambiguity, is the division within the government on strategy.

US REGIONAL STRATEGY

The Department of State Special Report 148 outlines US strategy for Central America.

> [The] general strategic objective of US diplomacy in Central America should be to reduce the civil wars, national conflicts, and military preparations to Central American dimensions.[2]

The report further argues that a comprehensive regional settlement must be based on respect for sovereignty, nonintervention with verifiable commitments to nonaggression and commitment to internal pluralism. The defense establishment implements a supporting military strategy "through military assistance programs, joint ground and naval exercises, and additional military support missions to improve the effectiveness of local military forces."[3] This strategy (ends-ways-means?) assigns DOD the tasks of:

- Increasing the effectiveness of the armed forces of El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala (and presumably the policy forces of Costa Rica).
- Demonstrating US power by joint exercises with the implied threatened use of force in the region.

This represents the political strategy option -- a political settlement without resort to US military intervention. This would appear the Congressional option of choice. The cornerstone of this option is a negotiated settlement.

> In most observers' eyes, the keystone of a political solution remains the Contadora process, which enjoys the backing of most Latin American and West European governments and is seen as a Latin American solution to a Latin American problem.[4]

The Administration, on the other hand, appears skeptical. Despite the production of a number of draft agreements, each reducing the areas of disagreement, the Administration has raised new objections. The final draft treaty of September 1984

> . . . addresses all the issues the Reagan Administration said should be addressed, including democratic elections, and does so in ways that apparently accommodate legitimate United States national interests. Thus Washington's newly found dissatisfaction with the treaty's "verification mechanisms" seems contrived.[5]

The President seems committed to a military strategy option, although in this case a military-CIA option is more descriptive. The near continuous exercising of US forces in Honduras (to include the unprecedented use of National Guard formations), the rise of and support for the Contras, the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors, and the increase of semi-permanent US forces for regional training all point towards this conclusion.

Employment of US military power as a means of deterring or altering Nicaragua is constrained by several factors. The first and most obvious constraint is the fact that most US general purpose forces are dedicated to the defense of Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Arabian Gulf. While perhaps some forces could be engaged in Central America in the current East-West climate,

Vietnam demonstrated the doubtful utility of US military intervention in a genuine revolutionary upheaval or civil war. In the absence of a direct threat on the US or overt aggression against an ally, a third constraint is the difficulty of acquiring and maintaining public and congressional support for military ventures in Central America.[6]

The result is a least common denominator approach that is no strategy at all. Foreign policy objectives must necessarily be so broad as to encompass both power bases. Ways in which to seek a negotiated political settlement are hindered by the Executive which places little faith in the good will of the parties, an essential ingredient in negotiations. Ways to implement a military strategy are hindered by the Legislature, which doles out resources in small amounts for specific purposes, limits the numbers of US military trainers, and holds the War Powers Act as the trump in this government poker game. It would seem Teddy Roosevelt's famous quote has turned around -- speak loudly and carry a small stick.

This inability of the US to achieve consensus, to forge a coherent strategy with measurable, achievable ends and balanced ways and means, handcuffs the power of the nation and bankrupts foreign policy. If consensus is impossible, one alternative for the Administration is to use a proxy, the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance, the Contras.

CONTRA STRATEGY

It is dangerous to assume the Contras are fully committed only to US objectives. At best, they are an independent force,

swayed by US support, pursuing a complementary objective. To examine their options, one must view the region and situation from their perspective. The Contras want, at the very least, to share political power in Nicaragua with the Sandinistas. While some elements undoubtedly want more, namely the overthrow of the Comandantes, the issue is rendered academic by Sandinista intransigence. The Comandantes have proven themselves unwilling to share power in Nicaragua. The history of the consolidation of the revolution has been one of centralizing power in a narrow Marxist-Leninist power base strongly supported by Cuba. The unprecedented regional military build-up, the documented support for the communist rebels in El Salvador, the internal hype concerning US military intervention all point to an unwillingness to compromise. This attitude leaves the Contras with only one viable objective -- the violent overthrow of the Sandinistas. This must be the Contra strategic end for the Comandantes have eliminated all other possibilities. Having embarked on a violent struggle, the Contras have a wide variety of ways from which to choose.

CONTRA MILITARY OPTIONS[7]

The first military option is the Ideological Model, the emergence of a great ideological strategist on the order of a Jefferson, a Lenin, or a Mao. The struggle in Central America has already pitted two great ideologies against one another, democratic capitalism versus Leninist Communism. It seems unlikely a new ideology will result from such a struggle. Historically, Latin America has failed to produce a great man of history since Simon

Bolivar. While leaders are made and not born, it is improbable the current cast of players will vault a charismatic savior with a new ideology into the forefront of the struggle.

Four nonideological models remain for Contra evaluation, the first is the Incremental Strategy.

> In an incremental strategy the accumulating strength may be geographically secured -- an ink blot moving out of the revolt-center -- or demographically secured -- an increasing number of the population subverted to the new authority.[8]

The incremental strategy thus requires a secure base and sufficient strength to consolidate geographic or demographic gains. A second nonideological scenario, the Foco Flash, depends on a discrete and violent event to achieve rebel advantage. This is the basis for the Castro-Debray revolutionary model, the introduction of organized, trained, and armed rebels to act as the magnet to draw the populace to the rebellion. Che Guevara in Bolivia is the most publicized, and unsuccessful, example of the Foco Flash. The third strategy, the Magic Means, rests on particular techniques or tactics. The most successful 20th century techniques have been labeled wars of national revolution and initially highlight assassination and guerrilla warfare. Ultimately the Magic Means depends on a single means to produce a vast effect. Serbian nationalists used this strategy, possibly unknowing, to start the Great War.

> A final scenario, the strategy of the fulcrum, proposes that, if an opponent is too powerful ever to be matched, no matter what the means, a revolt must seek a weakness of will. One approach is to maintain a certain level of rebel violence until the opponent decides to concede.[9]

In choosing their model, the Contras must always consider

the impact of ways on US Congressional support. If US political and financial backing is to be maintained, the rebel ways must be morally acceptable to the US and demonstrate a chance for success. Secretary of State Shultz has outlined congressional restrictions on assistance to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance as dependent on respect for international standards of conduct and restraint from violations of human rights and from other criminal acts.[10]

The Magic Means, the strategy of the wars of national liberation, would seem the most attractive option. It is well documented and has had proven success in numerous conflicts since World War II. Unfortunately for the Contras, the tactics associated with the Magic Means run afoul of US restrictions. Internal terrorism, intimidation of the populace, and the ends justify the means philosophy would ensure the immediate cessation of US support. The successful tactics of the communists, no matter how effective, will be rejected by the people of the US. To adopt the Magic Means, the Contras must be prepared to prosecute the conflict without US support, an undesirable alternative.

The demographics of Nicaragua and the commitment of Cuba to the Sandinista Revolution spells doom for the incremental strategy despite the superficial resemblance to the current state of affairs. A Contra move into the concentrated Nicaraguan population centers would transform the conflict from guerrilla to positional warfare. The Contras, even at twenty thousand strong, cannot hope to defeat a fully constituted conventional army, with

its Cuban support, on the open field of battle. A move into the sparsely populated interior is a viable option, but would such a move bring sufficient pressure on the Comandantes? Colonel Enrique Bermudez, the supreme commander of the rebel army adheres to such a strategy which he expresses as

> . . . the Contras' first aim was to drive Sandinista units from mountain regions in central and southern Nicaragua . . . the Contras will then concentrate on destroying communications and the Sandinistas' supply line from the Atlantic Coast to Managua.[11]

The critical question is will the population of Nicaragua rally to the support of the Contras? The Bay of Pigs experience points out the risks of such a move. Virtually no established communist government, with its international support base, has been successfully overthrown using the incremental strategy. The rebels are too vulnerable to government action. The resources of the incumbent government, supplemented by a communist sponsor, have been able to maintain the rule of few over many.

From the Contra viewpoint, the Foco Flash offers interesting possibilities. The key would seem to be tempting the Sandinistas into an imprudent act that would result in direct US intervention. If the Contras can demonstrate that the Sandinistas cannot control the countryside, might the temptation for a sustained strike at the Contra bases in Honduras prove irresistible? Such a Nicaraguan incursion into Honduras, if met with Honduran Armed Forces, could produce the Foco Flash that would solidify US resolve to act in the defense of Honduras. Once the ball of direct US-Nicaraguan combat starts rolling, escalation would seem inevitable. While this strategy is beset with ifs, it offers an attractive option to the Nicaraguan

Democratic Resistance. Despite its noncomformance with US objectives, certain elements of the current Administration could be counted on to jump on the bandwagon given any reasonable assurance of at least marginal congressional support. An 'invasion' of Honduras would give that support should the Comandantes prove so inept.

The strategy of the fulcrum, Fabian tactics applied to the strategic sphere, depends on a protracted conflict to wear down the people and weaken support for the Comandantes. Max Singer, the founder and former president of the Hudson Institute, supports this option. He defines Contra success as the fielding of a powerful enough force to expose and exploit the political weaknesses of the Sandinistas.[12] He advocates an option that maintains a military presence while the international political struggle is led by the US. The strategy of the fulcrum is slow and depends on continued support by the mercurial US government, two salient weaknesses.

The key in choosing the ways to follow is the need to consider the people of Nicaragua. General John Galvin, Commander of USSOUTHCOM, has written "the aspirations of the civilian combatants have exerted an increasingly powerful influence on the outcome".[13] He believes ideological mass indoctrination has become an increasingly important element of combat power. His assertion that conflict becomes a form of political education that forces a reluctant, basically neutral population wanting only to be left alone to take a stand in support of the insurgents must be considered by the Contras.

The best Contra strategy will pit their strengths against Sandinista weaknesses. Before an evaluation can be concluded, an examination of the means is necessary.

CONTRA MEANS

For better or worse, the Contras mirror their military trainers, the US. They are organized along conventional military lines with an extensive support base in Honduras. Their force, variously estimated at between eight and twenty thousand, is trained in basic individual and small unit infantry skills. Contra leaders have studied basic military tactics, map reading, weapons use, and human rights techniques while specialized courses are offered on explosives, antiaircraft missiles, intelligence, psychological and special warfare operations, parachuting, radio communications, and paramedical treatment.[14] The Contra syllabus compares favorably with the instruction presented to young US officers at Fort Benning or Fort Bragg. The result is a conventional military force with its reliance on continued external support. Indeed, their principal operations to date can be characterized as a live fire Ranger Course. Army Field Circular 100-20 would describe the Contra force as a small, decentralized structure of armed insurgents serving as a catalyst for mobilizing opposition against the existing regime.[15]

The Army of Nicaragua (Ejercito Popular Sandinista, EPS), on the other hand, is a duly constituted military force with combat, combat support, and combat service support elements. It enjoys a monopoly in artillery, armor, and air support. Although the effectiveness of the EPS may be hampered by the political

commitment of some of its conscripts, as consolidation and Cuban support continues, the EPS can be expected to gain tactical combat proficiency.

The relative strengths and weaknesses tend to fall within traditional molds. The rebels, exploiting a secure base, can train their force with relative immunity and select the time and place for combat. The EPS must secure the entire country, necessitating large manpower requirements, find, fix, and destroy the guerrillas. This cat and mouse game is performed in the Nicaraguan public eye -- the potentially decisive element.

COMPARATIVE CONTRA STRATEGIES

It would seem the Contras have but two viable options: an incremental strategy or the strategy of the fulcrum. While the Foco Flash is attractive, it would be imprudent to believe the Comandantes would prove so foolish. The means available to the Contras would favor the strategy of the fulcrum. Cross border incursions into Nicaragua in increasing size will force confrontation with Sandinista forces on terms favorable to the rebels. Guerrilla activity will draw ever more Nicaraguan soldiers to regions selected by the Contras. Care must be exercised to ensure tactical engagements are fought on Contra terms, overwhelming local superiority. As Contra forces gain experience and proficiency, selected shifts to positional warfare for limited durations will serve to decrease EPS morale and provide for increasing regional and world news coverage. The lack of a Nicaraguan base to protect, a requirement of the incremental strategy, permits the Contras to base in Honduras,

moving only when fully prepared and the situation is favorable. The EPS will be unable to bring their military superiority to bear. Their tanks, their artillery, their helicopters will prove liabilities rather than decisive assets. As the protracted nature of the conflict exacerbates the situation in Nicaragua, the Comandantes' reliance on rationing basic food and household items, forming state cooperatives, setting prices for the peasants products, and forcibly relocating villages will be their downfall. The people will revolt when the situation is intolerable with no hope for improvement.

IMPLICATIONS OF CONTRA STRATEGY

Were the Contras to adopt the strategy presented, the US must provide the framework to make the strategy successful. Three specific actions will be required as a minimum.

- Maintain the Contra military force.
- Develop the Contra political organization.
- Isolate Nicaragua from the Soviet Union and Cuba

Maintain the Contra military force. Support and sanctuary are the keys for the current contra military force. The US financial and training support must be maintained. Ideally, a multi-year support package is the best instrument for it conveys long term commitment and would impact favorably on morale. Training support in the form of individual and small unit tactical training should be continued until the expertise develops within the Contra organization. This would come soon as combat is the best instructor of all. The US must also use its influence in Honduras to ensure the acceptance of Contra

basecamps. Assurances of the US support, possibly in the form of a treaty, in the event of Nicaraguan 'invasion' would greatly assist. In light of current US-Honduras relations, these appear as do-able tasks. Economic incentives coupled with security assurances will be irresistible to Honduran leaders. Their risk will be small, their rewards great.

Develop the Contra political organization. The US should steal a page from the PLO, expand the Contra political organization, train its personnel, and assist them in establishing a presence in the Western World. Ultimately the struggle is political -- a strong political organization provides the opportunity for consensus building, creates the possibility of shared support, and provides legitimacy to the armed struggle. The effect on the people of Nicaragua of a constituted government in exile will provide a visible alternative to the continued repression of the Comandantes.

Isolate Nicaragua from the Soviet Union and Cuba. The main communist support for Nicaragua comes from or flows through Cuba. Breaking the Nicaragua-Cuba link must result in decreased materiel support, but more importantly, decreased psychological support. This is the first step in distancing the people of Nicaragua from the Comandantes. While this is an important task, it is also one extremely difficult to achieve. The US tried unsuccessfully to isolate Cuba in the 1960's. Certain incentives for Cuba may influence Castro to put self interests ahead of his desire to export revolution. Care must be exercised to ensure efforts do not become counterproductive and serve to push Cuba to greater levels of support for the Comandantes. At the very

least, the US must not permit Cuba to increase support to Nicaragua. Maintaining the current level and nature of support may be sufficient to set the stage for a Contra victory.

CONCLUSIONS

Is Nicaragua a lost battlefield? While the jury is still out, some conclusions about the situation today can be drawn.

- The US strategy for Nicaragua is confused. Strategic US aims are not expressed in terms of achievable ends. The constraints on US ways and means, caused by a divided US government, are not in concert with either a containment nor interventionist strategic end.

- The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance mirrors the confused US position. The lack of a strong diplomatic organization and need for US support strongly influence Contra ways and means.

- A Contra military strategy, build around the strategy of the fulcrum, would encourage continued US support.

- To have any possibility of success, the strategy of the fulcrum requires the US to influence Honduras in order to retain base camps outside of NIcaragua.

- Ultimately, the Contra job remains one of separating the people from the government. This must be done in a climate where the average citizen would rather be left alone. International recognition of a government in exile and continued violence may be the catalysts needed to implement this split.

ENDNOTES

1. Ronald Reagan, "Central American Policy:No Communist Colonies in America," Vital Speeches of the Day, Vol. 50, 1 June 1984, pp. 482-486.

2. US Department of State, The US and Central America: Implementing the National Bipartisan Commission Report, p. 30.

3. Ibid., p. 21.

4. Eldon Kenworthy, "United States Policy in Central America: A Choice Denied, "Current History, Inc., Vol. 84, March 1985, p. 97.

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6. Jeffrey Record, "Third World Conflicts: Implications for US Security and Force Structure," in Alternative Military Strategies for the Future, ed. by Keith A. Dunn and William O. Staudenmaier, pp. 167-169.

7. J. Bowyer Bell, On Revolt Strategies of National Liberation, pp. 9-16.

8. Ibid., p. 14.

9. Ibid., p. 16.

10. US Department of State, "Legislation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," message 220235Z October 1986, Section 204.

11. James LeMoyne, "With Rebels in Nicaragua: Battle Ready," New York Times, 3 March 1987, p. A1.

12. Max Singer, "Can the Contras Win?" National Review, 13 February 1987, p. 30.

13. General John R. Galvin, "Uncomfortable Wars: Toward A New Paradigm," in Course 5 Regional Appraisals The Americas, by US Army War College, 15 January 1987, pp. 236-251.

14. LeMoyne, p. A1.

15. US Army Command and General Staff College, Field Circular 100-20, p. 2-3.

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